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Lived Experiences of Criminology Students Facing Academic and Professional Course Challenges: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit of a Criminology degree involves navigating complex realities, intense academic rigor, professional course challenges, and significant environmental pressures. This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study explored the hurdles and coping mechanisms of 11 Criminology students through face-to-face, in-depth interviews. The study yielded five main themes: Struggling with Academic Rigor and Subject Mastery; Perseverance and Adaptation in Pursuit of Academic and Professional Goals; Resilience and Self-Motivation Amid Academic, Financial, and Personal Challenges; Overcoming Challenges to Build Competence and Resilience; and Persevering Through Academic Struggles in Criminology. Ultimately, the study concludes that despite facing cognitive, physical, and financial strains, students undergo a transformative journey to develop self-regulated competence sustained by internal ambition and vital social support. Therefore, educational institutions must foster supportive learning environments and strong student-teacher relationships to help Criminology students effectively navigate rigorous academic demands and On-the-Job Training (OJT) requirements to prepare for law enforcement careers.

Keywords: Academic Challenges; Academic Recovery; Cognitive Load; Coping Mechanisms; Criminology Education; Lived Experiences; Professional Course Challenges; Philippine Higher Education; Resilience; Socio-Economic Pressure; Student Persistence.

1.0. Introduction

Criminology education is an intellectually demanding field that intricately merges law, behavioral science, and applied forensics, requiring students to master both theoretical paradigms and practical competencies (Ahmad and Ismail, 2021; PRC, 2022). While major subjects such as Criminal Law and Jurisprudence, Criminalistics, and Forensic Science form the professional backbone for future law enforcers and investigators, the extensive technical content and complex analytical requirements present significant academic hurdles. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Order No. 5, Series of 2018, mandates the rigorous integration of academic and professional courses. Consequently, students frequently struggle to balance the heavy cognitive demands of classroom learning with the practical execution required during fieldwork, leading to academic fatigue, stress, and diminished motivation (CHED, 2018; Asio, 2022). These educational rigors are further compounded by socio-economic vulnerabilities, such as financial instability and limited cultural capital, which exacerbate physical exhaustion and learning difficulties (Pagulayan et al., 2021).

To understand how students navigate these multifaceted challenges, this study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives. Cognitive Load Theory explains how the inherent complexity of criminology subjects can overwhelm students limited cognitive resources, resulting in cognitive overload and hindered academic performance (Gkintoni et al., 2025). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) highlights the critical role of emotional well-being and intrinsic motivation, positing that a student's persistence is highly dependent on fulfilling the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Meanwhile, Constructivist Theory illustrates how students actively transform academic failures into learning opportunities by utilizing positive coping strategies—such as peer collaboration and self-reflection—to reconstruct their practical

understanding (Reyes, 2020). Guided by these frameworks, student resilience in criminology is conceptualized as a dynamic interaction of cognitive processing, motivational drive, and active coping, further sustained by empathetic institutional support and responsive pedagogy (Castroverde and Acala, 2021; Asio, 2021).

Given these considerations, this study aims to explore and describe how criminology students navigate academic adversity by identifying their specific learning challenges, motivational drivers, and resilience-based coping experiences.

By focusing on the qualitative dimensions of students lived experiences, this research addresses existing empirical and methodological gaps, particularly the over-reliance on quantitative metrics such as board examination results that frequently overlook the emotional and motivational aspects of academic resilience (Ahmad and Ismail, 2021; Latief et al., 2023).

1.1. Study Objectives

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Criminology students as they face various academic and professional course challenges. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1) To explore how Criminology students experience and cope with the mental and physical demands of academic rigor and subject mastery.
2) To describe the perseverance and adaptation required in managing the temporal and physical demands of academic and professional training.
3) To identify how students maintain resilience and self-motivation amid academic, financial, and personal challenges in their learning environment.
4) To investigate how students navigate academic and professional challenges to develop competence and resilience over time.
5) To examine the role of motivation, focus, and support systems in persevering through academic struggles.

2.0. Literature Review

Criminology education is an intellectually demanding field that requires the integration of law, behavioral science, and applied forensics. The Bachelor of Science in Criminology program expects students to master both the theoretical knowledge and practical competencies necessary for their future roles as law enforcers and investigators. Major subjects, such as Criminal Law and Jurisprudence, Criminalistics, and Forensic Science, introduce extensive technical content and complex analytical requirements.

According to Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory, these dense legal and procedural courses impose a high intrinsic cognitive load on students. When instructional strategies fail to manage this complexity, students experience cognitive overload, leading to mental fatigue, poor comprehension, and course failure. Recent studies support this, emphasizing that excessive cognitive demands negatively affect learning outcomes in complex, content-heavy disciplines (Sweller, van Merriënboer, & Paas, 2019; Ahmad & Ismail, 2021).

Furthermore, the dual nature of criminology training presents unique operational challenges. According to the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Order No. 5, Series of 2018, the curriculum integrates both academic and professional courses. Students frequently struggle to balance the cognitive demands of theoretical learning with the practical competencies required during internships and field exercises. Ahmad and Ismail (2021) revealed that students encounter difficulty interpreting forensic procedures and connecting classroom instruction to real-world applications. Similarly, Asio (2022) found significant gaps between students' theoretical understanding and practical execution, particularly in investigative analysis. In the Philippine context, these academic rigors are uniquely compounded by socio-economic factors, as students navigate higher education with limited economic capital, leading to further physical exhaustion and cognitive strain (Pagulayan et al., 2021; Gkintoni et al., 2025). Beyond cognitive barriers, motivation and emotional well-being significantly influence how students cope with these learning challenges. Anchored in Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, a student's persistence depends heavily on the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When facing academic setbacks, students who adopt positive coping strategies—such as peer collaboration and self-reflection—develop the capacity to transform failure into learning opportunities (Bruner, 1966; Reyes, 2020). This aligns with Masten's (2001) Resilience Theory, which frames resilience as a dynamic process shaped by internal strengths and external support systems. Institutional contexts play a vital role in this adaptive process; students who perceive empathy, autonomy support, and encouragement from their instructors demonstrate higher academic motivation and are more likely to sustain their persistence after experiencing failure (Castroverde & Acala, 2021; Villanueva & Ramos, 2024).

Despite previous research examining academic performance and board examination results, few studies have addressed the qualitative dimensions of students lived experiences and coping mechanisms (Ahmad & Ismail, 2021). Most prior works focus on quantitative measures without exploring the emotional and motivational aspects that drive academic resilience. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the transformative journey of students who fail major courses but choose to continue through reflective learning (Latief et al., 2023). Given these gaps, it is necessary to explore how criminology students navigate academic adversity, bridging the concepts of cognitive load, student drive, and adaptability to uncover how they transition from passive recipients to active architects of their professional identity.

3.0. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing Clark Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences, academic struggles, and coping mechanisms of Criminology students facing rigorous course challenges. The research was conducted at a higher education institution in Lanao del Norte, Northern Mindanao, Philippines, a setting that reflects the socio-academic realities of provincial criminology education. Participants consisted of 11 Bachelor of Science in Criminology students selected through purposive sampling until data saturation was achieved who had previously failed or repeated at least one major professional course. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using a specifically designed interview guide, conducted after obtaining informed consent and institutional clearance from the Misamis University

Research Ethics Committee (MUREC). The interviews, lasting approximately 25 to 30 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure absolute accuracy. Data analysis strictly followed Moustakas' systematic method encompassing epoche (bracketing), phenomenological reduction (horizontalization), clustering of significant statements into themes mapped against the four "Lifeworld" existential, imaginative variation, and the final synthesis of textural and structural descriptions to derive the universal essence of the students' experiences. Rigor and trustworthiness were further established through member-checking, while strict adherence to ethical standards, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and full compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, was meticulously maintained throughout the research process.

4.0. Results and Discussion

This study examined the lived experiences of 11 Criminology students enrolled in a Higher Education Institution in Lanao del Norte, a group specifically selected through purposive sampling due to their shared experience of failing or repeating at least one major professional course. Representing a diverse range of year levels, these students balanced their academic deficiencies alongside rigorous professional instruction and On-the-Job Training (OJT) duties. This composition provided a comprehensive view of their transformative journey from academic failure to persistent recovery. Beyond their academic standing, the participants' narratives revealed significant socio-economic and environmental pressures that heavily influenced their learning. Many navigated their degree programs amidst financial instability, with some serving as working students. As provincial learners, they frequently encountered challenges related to limited access to learning materials and the high physical demands of the criminology curriculum, which included early morning formations and intensive physical agility drills. Despite these hurdles and the stigma often associated with course repetition, the participants demonstrated a uniform motivational profile characterized by high resilience and a deep-seated commitment to the "Criminologist's Creed," viewing their current struggles as a necessary trial in their pursuit of becoming registered law enforcement professionals.

The interview transcripts were carefully analysed and interpreted through the lens of Clark Moustakas's four Lifeworld existential (Lived Body, Lived Time, Lived Space, and Lived Other). From the participants' narratives, five interrelated themes emerged: (1) struggling with academic rigor and subject mastery, (2) perseverance and adaptation in pursuit of academic and professional goals, (3) resilience and self-motivation amid academic, financial, and personal challenges, (4) overcoming challenges to build competence and resilience, and (5) persevering through academic struggles in criminology. These themes collectively highlight how students navigate the rigid demands of their education, transforming early cognitive overload and socio-economic stress into proactive adaptation and familial duty.

4.1. Struggling with Academic Rigor and Subject Mastery

This theme captures the participants' intense encounters with the intellectual demands and complex content of the Criminology curriculum. Participants described the significant cognitive and physical hurdles they faced when attempting to master specialized legal and technical subjects requiring high-level analytical processing. This signified the "Lived Body" experience, where academic difficulty was not merely a mental hurdle but a direct

source of physical exhaustion and cognitive paralysis. It represented the initial phase of their journey, where the sheer volume of technical information created a profound sense of being biologically and mentally overwhelmed.

Several participants stressed that the heavy volume of laws and technical requirements induced extreme pressure. Participant 1 highlighted the struggle to focus due to dense subjects, stating,

"For me… LEA (Law Enforcement Administration) … I truly had difficulty because it has a lot of laws. I couldn't catch up with my goal of just focusing on my studies." (P1)

Furthermore, Participant 2 emphasized the burden of memorization, noting,

"CLJ Book 1 class… I feel pressured, especially when it comes to memorizing the articles, because memorization is really where I struggle the most." (P2)

Participant 3 echoed this, pointing out the specific difficulty of forensics:

"CLJ is really difficult… Forensic personal identification techniques like fingerprints." (P3)

When taken together, these narratives show a consistent pattern of cognitive overload and a mismatch between the students' learning pace and the curriculum's density.

To counter this academic shock, participants described transitioning from total confusion to disciplined self-motivation. Participant 8 considered themselves a slow learner, sharing,

"Sometimes when the instructor is discussing the lesson, I do not immediately understand… I focus on self-discipline and motivating myself to succeed." (P8)

Similarly, Participant 7 noted using self-motivation during rigorous training:

"First, Ma'am, during training… I motivate myself and keep telling myself that I can handle it." (P7)

These findings are substantiated by Sharma (2025), who indicated that working memory limitations lead to cognitive overload when learners confront dense, highly technical information. The shared struggle regarding the sheer volume of legal articles manifests that Criminology students often experience "academic shock" when transitioning to professional-phase subjects. As McGregor (2007) noted, students often fail not from a lack of effort, but from the overwhelming gap between theoretical expectations and practical application. These experiences align directly with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), suggesting that high-volume instructional density easily overwhelms a student's finite cognitive capacity. This highlights the critical need for institutions to implement proper pedagogical pacing and remedial "bridge programs" to protect mental well-being and prevent early attrition.

4.2. Perseverance and Adaptation in Pursuit of Academic and Professional Goals

Data from the interviews illustrated the participants' ability to synchronize their personal lives with the rigid, semi-military professional standards of the program. Participants described the necessary process of adapting to grueling temporal and physical requirements to ensure their survival in the course. This signified the "Lived Time" existential, where participants had to radically shift their daily rhythms, representing a psychological transformation where the fear of failure was converted into a driving force.

Participants stressed that internal motivations and external promises of support helped them navigate the draining nature of the program. Participant 2 emphasized that the hurdles only solidified their ambitions:

"My desire to seek justice became stronger, inspiring me to pursue law enforcement." (P2)

Participant 3 noted the mental toll but framed it as a catalyst for hard work:

"Mentally… it can be draining. Sometimes I break down… this pushes me to work hard because it's difficult to succeed without finishing my studies." (P3)

Over time, participants moved from a state of reactive stress to one of proactive adaptation, recognizing that these hardships were vital preparatory stages. Participant 9 detailed how they became strictly structured:

"During our OJT... it was really difficult at first because we had to wake up around 4 in the morning... training for self-discipline. The experience that was really difficult... was being taught how to take actual fingerprints, then create affidavits… but it made it a very valuable and rewarding experience." (P9)

Participant 10 similarly recognized that

"Challenges from first year to fourth year and during internship may be difficult, but they serve as preparation for our future careers." (P10)

These findings align with Leary and DeRosier (2012), who found that developing positive adaptation in the face of stress directly impacts academic persistence. Latief et al. (2023) further noted that early academic struggles act as necessary "refining fires" for professional maturity. Framed within Constructivist Learning Theory (Bruner, 1966), students actively construct their own resilience through real-world hardships. By engaging in OJT and practical duties, students undergo an emotionally corrective experience that overwrites their classroom struggles, suggesting that increasing early "duty-based" exposure can provide at-risk students with the vocational drive needed to endure theoretical difficulties.

4.3. Resilience and Self-Motivation Amid Academic, Financial, and Personal Challenges

This theme highlights the intersection of academic struggles with the external environmental and social pressures defining the students' daily lives. Participants described managing academic focus while navigating the "noisy" background of financial lack and familial responsibilities, manifesting the existentials.

Financial anxiety and home-based labor were significant dividers of cognitive attention. Participant 1 shared,

"I never planned to go to college because my family was struggling financially… I can barely focus on studying because of tasks at home." (P1)

Participant 4 pointed out the severe impact of having no money:

"No money at all… my mind gets divided between thinking about the exam and the unpaid fees." (P4)

Personal problems also breached the academic space, as Participant 2 recalled:

"Impromptu oral recitation… I was distracted by personal problems… eventually failed the subject." (P2)

In the face of these burdens, empathetic instructors served as vital buffers. Participant 8 stressed the importance of responsive pedagogy:

"Being a slow learner… teaching methods and school policies help… instructors clearly explain lessons and repeat them if you don't understand." (P8)

This internal drive was echoed by Participant 10, who refused to succumb to the pressure:

"I refuse to quit my internship… as long as it's my chosen profession or course, you should keep moving forward… don't surrender." (10)

These findings are substantiated by John Albert et al. (2024), who noted that individuals facing financial hardship rely heavily on self-motivation to maintain resilience. Castroverde and Acala (2021) highlighted that student-teacher relationships are vital components in fostering academic survival in disadvantaged settings. Reflecting Social Support Theory and "Relational Resilience" (Crawford, 2025), external validation from an authority figure directly mitigates internal socio-economic anxiety. When a student's personal is compromised by poverty, the institution must step in as a demonstrating compassionate education through flexible policies and patient instruction.

4.4. Overcoming Challenges to Build Competence and Resilience

Data illustrated the maturation of the participants' coping strategies as they progressed through their degree. Participants described a tactical shift from a passive state of feeling overwhelmed to an active state of exercising autonomy over their learning habits, marking a transition within the "Lived Body" from chronic stress to empowerment.

Participants stressed that deliberate effort and time management became their primary coping mechanisms. Participant 4 emphasized overcoming early struggles:

"Since First year… I struggled to manage time… improve myself by studying more consistently… overcome challenges in Water Survival." (P4)

Participant 5 agreed, noting,

"Time management is really the key… to cope, I study more, listen carefully, and work hard." (P5)

Even when exhausted, the drive to build competence prevailed, as Participant 3 explained:

"Mentally… draining… Even when I search for answers on Google… sometimes I skip it and come back the next day." (P3)

Balancing these responsibilities served as a testing ground for resilience, proving that "academic grit" is effectively developed through repeated exposure to failure. Participant 11, who balanced a job and studies, admitted,

"Balancing job and studies… break down… test myself… improve… still able to pass requirements." (P11)

These findings are supported by Sandua (2024) and Villanueva and Ramos (2024), who argued that resilience in Criminology is built through conscious daily stress management. The act of failing and repeating serves as a

necessary metacognitive trigger compelling individuals to adapt (Johnson, Gran, and Cohn, 2025). Aligning with Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), conscious discipline allows students to build professional self-efficacy, indicating a crucial transition toward Self-Regulated Learning. Consequently, Criminology departments should explicitly teach study skills and executive functioning as core competencies during freshman orientation.

4.5. Persevering Through Academic Struggles in Criminology

This final theme captures the core "essence" of the participants' journey: the unwavering drive that kept them in the program despite multiple failures. Participants described their "long-term dream" and familial honor as the ultimate forces preventing surrender. This manifested as a source of relational strength, signifying that persistence was deeply tied to a sense of duty toward their parents.

Despite facing intense pressure, the desire to succeed remained intact. Participant 1 noted,

"I lacked time to study and struggled to manage priorities, but I truly want to finish and succeed." (P1)

Participant 8 highlighted that their resilience was deeply anchored in honoring their family:

"Being a slow learner discourages me, but I stay motivated by self-discipline and my parents' trust in my future." (P8)

Participant 7 resolved that quitting was not an option:

"After failing, I realized I must motivate myself and participate in class; no matter how difficult, I will finish the course." (P7)

These findings are substantiated by Henson (2022), who explored how growing up in a family-oriented home acts as a powerful "meaning-maker" for academic persistence. Zaportiza and Cuevas (2025) similarly revealed that the transition from "dream to badge" is rooted in deep personal perseverance. As Hadi and Gharaibeh (2023) indicated, true self-determination requires the ability to delay gratification, which for these students was directly fueled by the desire to honor their families.

This profoundly manifests the Filipino cultural value of utang na loob (debt of gratitude), transforming internal perseverance into a relational duty. For these students, earning the Criminology badge represents a transformation of their entire family's socio-economic status. By actively fostering this "professional vision" early in the curriculum, institutions can provide the emotional anchor students need to withstand academic storms, significantly increasing their threshold for pain and failure.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1. Conclusion

The study concludes that navigating the rigorous Criminology program is a profoundly transformative journey requiring students to overcome intense cognitive overload, physical exhaustion, and complex socio-economic pressures. While early academic setbacks frequently stem from dense instructional demands rather than a lack of

inherent capability, vulnerable students are further challenged by financial and domestic burdens; consequently, empathetic pedagogical interventions and supportive learning environments serve as the most critical buffers against attrition. Despite these monumental hurdles, the grueling physical and temporal demands of the curriculum act as vital metacognitive triggers that foster psychological maturation. Through repeated exposure to academic adversity, students transition from a state of reactive stress and overwhelm to one of proactive adaptation, ultimately emerging as autonomous, self-regulated learners. Most importantly, the findings affirm that the ultimate catalyst for student persistence is relationality. Driven by the deep cultural value of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), students elevate the pursuit of the professional "badge" from a mere individual ambition into a binding moral obligation to honor their families, a conviction that serves as their absolute shield against academic surrender and sustains their long-term professional resilience.

5.2. Future Suggestions

Based on the results of this inquiry, the following areas are suggested for future research to further strengthen Criminology education:

- **Longitudinal Tracking of Academic Recovery:** Conduct a longitudinal study to monitor the long-term professional success and board examination performance of students who previously failed major courses to validate the effectiveness of academic grit.
- **Comparative Analysis of Institutional Support:** Perform a comparative study between urban and provincial higher education institutions to determine how differences in facility access and instructional resources impact student resilience.
- **Gender-Specific Lived Experiences:** Investigate the unique challenges faced by female Criminology students in a traditionally male-dominated field to identify specific socio-emotional hurdles they may encounter.
- **Impact of Working Student Interventions:** Explore the specific needs of "working students" within Criminology to develop targeted scheduling and financial policies that mitigate the risk of burnout and attrition.
- **Quantitative Measurement of Coping Effectiveness:** Conduct a quantitative study to measure the prevalence of the academic challenges identified here and the statistical effectiveness of various coping mechanisms across a larger university population.
- **Role of Cultural Values in Persistence:** Further examine how cultural concepts like *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) influence professional persistence in other high-pressure law enforcement programs.

5.3. Recommendation

In light of these findings, it is recommended that College of Criminal Justice Education “(CCJE)” administrators evaluate and adjust the current curriculum’s sequencing of heavily loaded major subjects to prevent cognitive overload, alongside implementing remedial "bridge programs" during freshman orientation that explicitly teach

essential study skills and executive functioning. To alleviate the severe socio-economic pressures faced by vulnerable students, administrators should also establish flexible payment policies and actively connect students with institutional scholarships. Concurrently, criminology instructors are encouraged to adopt empathetic teaching strategies and proper pedagogical pacing breaking down complex legal concepts into manageable modules and maintaining an approachable demeanor to serve as a vital buffer against student attrition. To help learners proactively adapt to the program's physical demands, practicum and On the Job Training "(OJT)" coordinators should integrate structured, duty-based exposures early in the curriculum, fostering a "professional vision" and a "Criminologist-in-waiting" mindset. Students themselves are urged to utilize early academic setbacks as metacognitive triggers, proactively developing robust time management habits to transition from a passive state of overwhelm to active, self-regulated learning. Recognizing that familial validation is the strongest predictor of persistence, parents and families are encouraged to maintain open lines of emotional support, understanding that their trust acts as a protective shield throughout this high-pressure journey. Finally, future researchers should expand on these insights by exploring the unique lived experiences of specific sub-demographics, such as working or female criminology students, and by conducting quantitative studies to measure the prevalence of these academic challenges and the broader effectiveness of these proposed coping mechanisms across larger university populations.

Declarations

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors have declared that no competing financial, professional or personal interests exist.

Consent for publication

Both authors contributed to the manuscript and consented to the publication of this research work.

Author Contribution

M. C. Baya: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Writing - Original Draft Preparation. J.F. Cuevas Jr.: Supervision, Reviewing, and Editing.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Availability of data and material

Supplementary information such as the raw files of the participants' responses are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Misamis University Research Ethics Committee.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Misamis University Research Ethics Committee.

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Declaration of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that Gemini and NotebookLM were used for finding related studies and literature, and that Gemini also assisted with proofreading and language refinement in the generation of this manuscript.

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